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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000184

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DAKAR PASS RAO, ODC, AND DAO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [GA](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PROMINENT JOURNALIST'S COMMENTS ON
COUP ATTEMPT

REF: A. BANJUL 182
[1](#)B. BANJUL 178
[1](#)C. BANJUL 177
[1](#)D. STATE 45407 (TD-314/20413-06)
[1](#)E. 05 BANJUL 836 (ALL NOTAL)

BANJUL 00000184 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Well-informed journalist, Pap Saine, expressed certainty that there had been a coup attempt foiled here March 21, asserting that the immediate cause was widespread discontent in the regular army over special benefits enjoyed by President Jammeh's guard force. Saine indicated that the number of detainees -- largely military officers -- over the failed plot had risen to about 20. He did not/not believe that Jammeh would react to the incident by staging a renewed crackdown on the opposition parties. Saine is no supporter of the Jammeh government, but made clear his opposition to removing it by force. Ambassador took the occasion to reiterate USG's firm opposition to any extra-constitutional change of government, whether in The Gambia or elsewhere. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, we are heartened by the presence of both ruling party and opposition representatives at a March 23 conference organized by UNDP on donor assistance for the 2006-7 Presidential and National Assembly elections here. END SUMMARY.

SOURCE EXPRESSES CERTAINTY OVER REPORTED COUP ATTEMPT

[1](#)2. (C) In March 24 conversation with Ambassador and DCM, a well-informed Embassy contact, editor-in-chief of independent daily, "The Point," Pap Saine, said he was certain that there had actually been a plot within the military to overthrow President Jammeh uncovered the evening of March 21 (refs a,b, c, and d). Saine stated that the ringleader, Chief of Defense Staff (CHOD) Lt Col Ndure Cham, and his fellow plotters were holding their final planning meeting when word of their scheme leaked to the now-Deputy CHOD, Lt Col Peter Singhateh, who informed the now-CHOD, Col Lang Tamba. The latter, in turn, had the leading plotters arrested -- with the notable exception of Cham, who managed to escape -- before they could activate the coup plan by occupying the Presidential compound, national radio and television offices, and other sites. Asked about rumors that Cham had been secretly killed, Saine was skeptical, saying he regarded as

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credible the GOTG's statement that Cham was currently hiding out in Senegal's Casamance region.

¶3. (U) Ambassador took the occasion to underscore USG's firm opposition to any extra-constitutional attempt to change a government, whether in The Gambia or elsewhere. Saine responded that he shared our view entirely, notwithstanding his differences with the Jammeh government.

REASONS FOR THE COUP

¶4. (C) Saine said he was not at all surprised to learn of this latest attempt to overthrow Jammeh, noting previously unsuccessful coup attempts in 1994 (shortly after Jammeh's own successful coup earlier that year), 1995, and 2000. Saine stated that the immediate cause of this most recent plot was discontent throughout the regular army over the extra benefits enjoyed by the several hundred or so personnel assigned to the President's guard force. Among these extra benefits, according to Saine, Jammeh, as a precaution against palace coups, provided the equivalent of ten thousand dollars in cash for distribution to the guards each time he travelled abroad. In addition, Saine continued, Jammeh ensured that the guards received special food rations. (NOTE: We find Saine's explanation plausible and have no basis for challenging it, although we note that, per ref b, a member of this guard force is on the list of those detained for suspected involvement in the failed plot. END NOTE.) Saine remarked that Jammeh himself evidently feared an overthrow attempt, asserting that "six months ago" the President had offered a reward of 500,000 dalasis (approx. Dols 18,000) to anyone in the military providing information on a coup plot.

¶5. (C) Saine suggested that another factor in any coup plotting here could stem from The Gambia's possible oil wealth. Those opposed to Jammeh, he argued, could well

BANJUL 00000184 002.2 OF 002

decide to remove him in order to prevent him from "usurping" the revenues from whatever oil ended up being extracted in The Gambia. At the same time, Saine indicated that he did not know whether oil actually figured in plotters' calculations in the March 21 incident.

UPDATE ON DETAINEES

¶6. (C) Saine indicated that the number of persons picked up for suspected involvement in the coup plot continued to grow, putting the current number at around 20, the large majority of them military officers. (NOTE: In its March 24 issue, the local journal, "Independent," claimed that 23 persons had so far been detained. END NOTE) He was skeptical of reports, per ref a, that the former National Intelligence head, Daba Marena, and his deputy would soon be released for lack of evidence, saying in fact they were probably involved. He commented that Marena, in particular, may well have been inspired by the example of Mauritanian Presidential security chief Fal in ousting President Taya during the latter's absence in 2005. (NOTE: Unlike Fal, though, Marena was actually abroad with his President -- in Mauritania -- when the coup plot here was foiled. END NOTE) Saine confirmed the detention of the prominent former Mayor of a Banjul suburb, Abdoulie Conteh, noting that the latter had become a bitter political foe of Jammeh and, as a former senior military officer who retained links to the armed forces leadership, may well have been recruited for the plot.

CRACKDOWN ON THE OPPOSITION IN THE OFFING?

¶7. (C) Asked whether Conteh's detention could presage a crackdown on the opposition similar to that in November 2005

(ref e), Saine responded in the negative. He asserted that the March 21 incident was "essentially a military affair," and that there was no evidence of support for the plot on the part of the country's opposition parties. Saine expected that authorities would allow the opposition to continue to hold public rallies and other gatherings in their campaigning for the 2006-7 Presidential and National Assembly elections. (NOTE: While the opposition parties themselves have so far been publicly silent over the coup, on March 23, two opposition-leaning journals, Saine's "The Point" and "The Independent," ran editorials denouncing the plot and asserting that such attempts at extra-constitutional replacement of governments had no place in the democratic society to which The Gambia aspired. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

18. (C) As the dust settles over the coup attempt, the generally business-as-usual atmosphere here persists. Saine is no supporter of the Jammeh government, but made clear his opposition to the overthrow attempt -- and left no doubt of his certainty that the coup plot was real. We find noteworthy his expectation that the failed coup attempt will not prompt a renewed crackdown on the opposition by Jammeh, although of course the situation will warrant continued close monitoring. We are heartened, in this regard, that representatives of both the ruling APRC party and the opposition attended a March 23 conference organized by the local UNDP office on donor assistance for the 2006-7 elections; report follows via septel. END COMMENT.

STAFFORD